

Consensus

Volume 42
Issue 1 *Effective Community Engagement
through Ministry Projects*

Article 9

2-5-2021

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Recommended Citation

Jensen, Gordon A. (2021) "Commemoration of the 20th Anniversary of the Signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," *Consensus*: Vol. 42 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol42/iss1/9>

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Commemoration of the 20th Anniversary of the Signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

Gordon A. Jensen¹

Romans 3:21-28 and Matthew 13:31-33

It only takes one small thing to change the world. All it takes is for a small, insignificant seed to be deliberately or accidentally scattered on the ground. That small insignificant, or perhaps even overlooked seed, however, buried in the ground, rises into a new life and grows its roots down, deep into the soil, even as its trunk and branches grow up into the sky toward the sun. In growing, the tree gives life to creation, absorbing carbon dioxide and breathing out oxygen. However, there is a catch: in order to live, to give life to the world, the seed has to die. Death and resurrection. It is the work of God.

It only takes one small thing. A little yeast, insignificant in amount, is added to some flour and water. The yeast is absorbed into the flour and dissolved into the water. It disappears. You might even say it dies. However, then a miracle happens, as the small ball of dough begins to rise, and grow. We taste its benefits. In dying to itself, the yeast gives birth to new life, to the bread of life. Death and resurrection. It is the work of God.

It was just a small thing, an insignificant thing, in the grand scheme of things. A simple misunderstanding of indulgences. A coin clinking in the collection box, and a promise that a soul would spring from purgatory. Even as that coin sunk into the coffer, the desire for change began. The roots for a needed reform went deep into the soil of the church, and an unhealthy complacency in the church was shattered. However, in the process of reform, the church was fractured. The vision of the one holy church was dead. In order to live fully as the church, the church had to die. Death and resurrection. It is the work of God.

Dying and rising. It is only in dying that the seed can live. It is the cycle of life. We plant a seed into the soil so that it will die to itself, and then, and only then, can it rise to new life. This is the story of the church. Only in dying to itself daily can the church live in a new, resurrected way in the world. In a way, that is what reformations or renewals, or restorations in the church today are all about. It is about getting rid of the husks that, instead of protecting the seed as the husks are designed to do, become barriers to the seed, preventing it from sinking fully into the ground so that it can become a new creation. Death and resurrection. It is the work of God.

Reformation, however, is not a “protestant” thing. It is far older than that. The church has always been reforming. The idea of reform has always begun with a small seed, a seed of hope or a seed that has been overlooked, spilling onto fertile soil. The apostles, for example, introduced the possibility of Gentiles also being included – something they had picked up from the prophet Isaiah. The old vision of the people of God had to be revised, reformed by God’s vision that tore down old ways of thinking and old walls that no longer protected a community, but now served only to divide the community. Only an act of God could tear down those walls. It was the work of God.

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The early church, like the church of today, has always struggled to be faithful witnesses to God's love, grace and mercy. It continues to hold true that whenever the church forgets to focus its eyes on what God is calling us to do, God calls forth prophets and witnesses to restore the church. It is work of God.

Thus, one of the main reasons for the development of monastic orders was to call the church to refocus on the actions of God. The Benedictines and Cluniacs, the Cistercians and Franciscans, the Augustinians and Jesuits, all came into being because people realized that the way Christianity was being practiced needed to be reformed, to bring it closer to the ideals of Jesus. It was the work of God.

Later on, monastic orders trained "reform preachers," long before the troublesome monk Martin Luther showed up on the scene. The Papal Reform Commission of the 1530s, the English *Act of Reform* in the same decade, and the Councils of Trent and Vatican II were actions of reform. The quest for holiness was an action of reform. In all of these actions, the shuttered windows were opened, and the fresh air of new life, renewed life, came flooding in. It is the work of God.

All of these actions began with a small seed, scattered by God, to where it was needed. These reforms and renewals came about because people have repeatedly discovered that something had to die in order for new life to burst forth. Life has triumphed. A seed that is dead pushes through the soil and bursts into life. In the process, the world is changed. It is the work of God.

In our busy-ness, in our dreams and visions, we so easily assume that the reformations experienced by the church are the work of human hands. We look to the reform-minded Popes, such as Leo I, and Gregory VII, who were given the title "the great," in large part because of the much-needed reforms they brought about in the church. We call John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, the Wesley brothers, Pope John XXIII and Francis I 'reformers of the church,' turning them into heroes of our traditions. However, that is to forget that it is God, the giver of life, who is the author of the life-giving reformations and renewals in the church. Luther himself, for example, made it very clear that he was not a reformer. God alone, he insisted, was the reformer.² It is we – including the reformers of the church – who are the ones needing reform. We are the ones who need to die in order to live. We need to die to self and so that we can be raised to life. Resurrections are not something we can do ourselves. It is the work of God.

It only takes a small thing – something as small as a seed or a bit of yeast, for a step forward in ecumenical discussions. Looking at the same picture, and seeing what others see, instead of only seeing what we have always seen. In ecumenical conversations, those incredibly small details or simple phrases or comments can open the path to reconciliation between distanced family members. A small thing, a simple thing, often reminds us that to live, we must die to ways of thinking to which we have become accustomed. These small things, so easily overlooked, can leaven the dough and give rise to the bread of life. However, these life-giving things are not the things we contribute to ecumenical conversations. Ecumenism is possible because God is working. What breathes life into ecumenical relationships are the life-giving actions of God, who takes small and simple things and makes them the bedrock of our faith. It is small things, like St. Paul's declaration to us that "we are

² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Career of the Reformer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), Vol. 31: 250.

justified by faith apart from works of law, lest anyone should boast” (Rom 3:28). It is the work of God.

When churches become so enthralled by what they have done and what they contribute to the true faith, God steps in and reminds us that God makes salvation possible. God alone makes faith possible by speaking a Word. After all, when God speaks, life happens. This Living Word, spoken to us today, opens up the possibilities of life for us. When we become curved in on ourselves, caught up in all that we think we need to do, God breaks us out of our self-centeredness by proclaiming what Christ has already done for us. This foundational reality makes unity in Christ possible for us.

The signings of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (for there were many signings) remind us, as people of God, that it is Christ’s actions for us that are at the center of life. That is what has brought our faith traditions into being. It is God’s actions, growing deep into the soil of this world and high into life eternal, which gives us our common faith. Together, we confess that God has acted for us, and has poured out God’s amazing, unmerited grace upon us – even while we are yet sinners (Rom 5:8), as St. Paul reminds us. God draws our eyes to a new picture. This picture is not of us. This new picture ID that we now see reveals instead whose we are: children of God. We can still see the United, Presbyterian, Anglican, Reformed, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and other familiar clothes on us, but what captures our attention in the picture is the face of God, the face of Christ. Our new ID picture is also an action picture. It is a video, a video of God drawing people together into life in its fullness, life in its richness, a life made possible only by Christ. It is a picture that reminds us that together, we celebrate “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph 4:5-6). Because God has acted, because God alone can give us life, life that spreads into all of creation, we can be people who work for justice, people of hope.

We have been baptised into Christ, into Christ’s death like his and into a resurrection like his. In that baptism into Christ, we are buried with Christ, and we are raised with Christ. It is the story of the seed that needs to die, and it is the story of the yeast that gives up its life to give life to the bread of life. What is important, at the end of the day, however, is that God has acted. God’s actions alone bring us into life. It is only by God’s actions alone that ecumenism will grow and flourish. That reality sets us free to work together for justice, peace, and the care of all creation so that all creation can experience life.

Life in Christ. Life as modelled by Christ. Life as God meant it to be. Life made possible by God. All because of God. In response, all we can say is “thanks be to God.” Amen.